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ABSTRACT

Traditional theories of development view separation and individuation as primary tasks of adolescents; the self-in-relation framework, however, argues that the autonomous and separate self-paradigm does not describe female development. Current research suggests that self-esteem arises from subscribing to separate self-definitions for males and connected self-definitions for females. However, these gender differences in self-development have been primarily obtained through studies with Anglo American subjects. This study examines whether gender differences in self-esteem and self-orientation (e.g., separate self and connected self) exist among Mexican American adolescents in the South Texas border region. Participants (N=206) completed a general background questionnaire, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and the Relationship Self Inventory. ANOVA results indicated no significant gender differences on any of the dependent measures; at the same time, significant correlations exist between self-orientations and self-esteem. Both males and females subscribed to connected self and self and other care definitions more than separate self definitions. Results are discussed in terms of the different social contexts and cultural value systems that play important roles in the self-development of adolescents of Mexican descent. Implications for counseling and future research are discussed. (Contains 43 references.) (FMK)

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Running head: SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-IN-RELATION IDENTITY

Self-Esteem and Self-in-Relation Identity Among Mexican American Adolescents

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Abstract

Traditional theories of development view separation and individuation as primary tasks of adolescents. The self-in-relation framework, however, argues that the autonomous and separate self paradigm does not describe female development. Male self-definition is characterized by themes of separation and autonomy (separate self). Females, on the other hand, define self primarily in relationships and connectedness to others (connected self). Current research suggests that self-esteem arises from subscribing to separate self-definitions for males and connected self-definitions for females. However, these gender differences in self-development have been primarily obtained through studies with Anglo American subjects. The purpose of this study was to determine if gender differences existed in self-esteem and self-orientation (e.g., separate self and connected self) among Mexican American adolescents in the South Texas border region. Participants consisted of 206 adolescents (102 males and 104 females) who completed a general background/ demographic questionnaire, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), and the Relationship Self Inventory (RSI). ANOVA results indicated no significant gender differences were found on any of the dependent measures. Results indicated that both males and females subscribed to connected self and self and other care definitions more than separate self definitions. Significant correlations between self-orientations and self-esteem indicated that the higher the self-esteem the higher the subscription to connected self and self and other care definitions across all subjects. Results were discussed in terms of the different social contexts and cultural value systems that play important roles in the self-development of adolescents of Mexican descent. Implications for counseling Mexican Americans and for conducting future research were discussed.

Self-Esteem and Self-in-Relation Identity Among Mexican American Adolescents

Traditional theories of development describe adolescence as a time of separation, individuation, and autonomy-seeking (Blos, 1962; Erickson, 1963). The development of a separate, autonomous self is considered the hallmark of maturity and identity. This focus on the individual achievement of the self has been criticized for lack of emphasis on connection and relationship (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Josselson, 1988; Miller, 1991). Current thinking suggests that the detachment/separation paradigm may not accurately reflect the development of women, adolescents, and infants (Josselson, 1988). Theorists of female development argue that an emphasis on strong interpersonal relationships characterizes the self development of girls and women (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1988; Miller, 1991; Zilback, 1993). Josselson (1988) and Steinberg (1990) suggest that detachment from family ties during adolescence may not be as prevalent for girls as traditionally viewed. Steinberg (1990) suggests that adolescents strive to maintain harmonious relationships with their parents, and demonstrate higher self-esteem and healthier functioning the more they are interrelated with their parents. Thus, the transformations in the parent-child relationship during adolescence may tend toward interdependence, as opposed to separation and autonomy.

Brown and Gilligan (1992) argue that there is a crisis in the self-development of adolescent females derived from a conflict between connectedness and self-interest. In order for girls in the mainstream Anglo culture to remain responsive to themselves, they must resist the traditional feminine role of caring for others. To remain connected with others, they must resist the social prescriptions of separation and autonomy (Gilligan, 1989). Girls are caught between caring for others or caring for self. Female teenagers begin to give up their own knowledge, desires, and needs in order to please others and to maintain relationships. Therefore, a female's sense of self can be described as underground (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), disavowed (Stern, 1991), denied (Mirkin, 1994), betrayed and falsified (Pipher,

1994), silenced (Jack, 1991), lost (Hancock, 1989), and altered to accommodate the needs and desires of others (Miller, 1991).

Female adolescents experience a significant loss in self-esteem that contrasts not only with male adolescents, but with their own earlier self-confidence (AAUW, 1991; Brown & Gilligan, 1992). This decrease in self-esteem may be the result of a struggle between caring for self and caring for others (Saitzyk, 1995). This crisis in female adolescent self-development has been largely demonstrated in studies of Anglo American adolescent females, and therefore may be a cultural product of that particular context (Erkut & Marx, 1995). The society, socialization process, and point in time in which the adolescent develops play critical roles in defining his or her ethnic or gender self-concepts (Mirkin, 1994; Rotheram-Borus & Wyche, 1994).

Adolescent self-esteem has been the focus of numerous studies, which have resulted in inconsistent findings. Dukes and Martinez (1994) report that the self-esteem of minority adolescents is generally as high as that of their white peers, and is higher among adolescent males than females. Conversely, the American Association of University Women (1991) reports that Hispanic female adolescents experience significantly lower levels of self-esteem than their Anglo American counterparts. Moreover, while some studies report that the self-esteem of female adolescents is significantly lower than the self-esteem of males (AAUW, 1991; Bohan, 1973; Richman, Clark, & Brown, 1985), other studies (Thornberg & Jones, 1982; Whitside, 1976) have found that adolescent females have higher self-esteem than males. Still other studies (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Wylie, 1979) have found no significant gender differences in self-esteem. Dukes and Martinez (1994) suggest that these inconsistencies may be the result of differences in theoretical frameworks, as well as the self-esteem measures employed in the empirical investigations.

The self-in-relation model of identity development (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976) reframes traditional definitions of self and recognizes the importance of

relatedness and connectedness in the female sense of self. For males, self-orientation is characterized by separation, independence, and autonomy (separate self) definitions. Females, on the other hand, define self primarily in terms of relationships and connectedness to others (connected self). Gilligan (1988) emphasizes that neither self-orientation is gender-exclusive, but rather the connected self-orientation is more predominant in women than in men. The relational theorists (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976; 1991; Surrey, 1991) argue that connection and relatedness to others are central to female development; autonomy and self-direction for females develop within the context of relationships. Males come to feel better about themselves the more they are separated (autonomous) and females, the more they are connected (Jordan, 1994; Josephs, Markus, & Tajorodi, 1992; Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991).

Gilligan (1988) considers the tendency for females to give care to others at the expense of self as the main concern in female development. Some researchers (Gilligan, 1982; Pearson, Reinhart, Strommen, Donelson, Barnes, Blank, Cebollero, Cornwell, & Kampter, 1992) suggest that a females's connected self-orientation may be more manifested in caring for the needs of others and not for self (primacy of other care), rather than caring for the needs of both self and others (self and other care).

Pearson et al. (1992) found that women scored significantly higher than men on measures of connected self and men scored significantly higher than women on measures of separate self. However, they found no gender differences on primacy of other care and self and other care. A significant negative correlation was found between self-esteem and primacy of other care for women, while self-esteem and self and other care were not significantly related for either gender. In a female adolescent sample, Saitzyk (1995) found that self and other care and connected self were positively correlated, though the coefficients were not statistically significant, with social self-competence and global feelings of self worth. She found that older female adolescents tended to score higher in primacy of other care than their

younger counterparts. However, Saitzyk found no significant correlations between self-esteem and primacy of other care.

The processes of identity formation are influenced by ethnicity. Rotheram-Borus and Wyche (1994) question Erickson's (1968) model of healthy identity arguing that its emphasis on individuation ignores both ethnic and gender diversity. Hispanics endorse a strong group and family orientation (familism) and do not place great value on individuation (Rotheram-Borus & Wyche, 1994; Segura & Pierce, 1993). Hispanic cultures also tend to endorse passivity versus active pursuance of individual goals, and are more accepting of authority and emotional expressiveness (Rotheram-Borus & Wyche, 1994). Martinez (1988) distinguishes Mexican Americans from other Hispanics, noting that they have a higher resistance to assimilation due to the geographic proximity to their country of origin. Furthermore, borderlanders are even more unique due to the influence of the constant cross-border and cross-cultural ties and relationships (Martinez, 1994; Russell & Flores, 1996). The majority of Mexican-origin residents in the U.S.-Mexico border region tend to be less acculturated to the American mainstream society and typically maintain stronger ties to Mexican cultural values and traditions (Russell & Flores, 1996). Because the social environments and cultural value systems differ for Mexican Americans, especially those living in the border region, their perceptions of self and their orientations of self may differ from Anglo Americans.

Although North American mainstream culture continues to expect "limitless female giving and self-denial" (Mirkin, 1994, p.79), the Mexican culture more strongly dictates selflessness, total surrender of self, and exclusive focus on others in what has been described as *marianismo* (Comaz-Diaz, 1988; Gil & Vazquez, 1996; Segura & Pierce, 1993). *Marianismo* mandates care for others exclusively, rather than for self and others. The conflict between the selfishness of North American individualism and the selflessness of the traditional Mexican female gender role, produces a crisis in self-esteem (Gil & Vazquez, 1996). Hispanic women

are "caught in a bind between selflessness and selfishness" in which "doing your duty is making you feel bad about yourself but that not doing it overwhelms you with guilt" (p. 85).

Gender differences in adolescent self-development have been primarily obtained through studies with Anglo American subjects. There is a noticeable lack of empirical data on the self-development of adolescents of Mexican descent. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine gender differences in self-esteem and self-in-relation identity among Mexican American adolescents in the South Texas border area. Additionally, this study investigated the correlational relationships between self-esteem and self-in-relation.

Methods

Participants

Participants, recruited on a voluntary basis, consisted of 206 adolescents (104 females and 102 males) of Mexican descent living in the South Texas border region. Their ages ranged from 13 to 18, and they were in grades eight through twelve. The mean age of the population was 16, and 90% of the sample consisted of students who were performing satisfactorily in school. Of the total, 36% reported that their fathers were Mexican citizens and 33% indicated that their mothers were Mexican citizens. Forty three percent of the participants reported that their mothers used only or mostly Spanish and 51% indicated that their fathers spoke only or mostly Spanish. One third of the subjects reported speaking only or mostly Spanish at home, though all of the subjects spoke and read English fluently.

Instruments

The participants completed a packet of surveys (in English) consisting of a demographic questionnaire and two self-report instruments: a) the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and b) the adolescent version (Saitzyk, 1995) of the Relationship Self Inventory (Pearson et al, 1992).

The general background questionnaire consisted of 20 items assessing the subject's general background and demographics. The questions included information on: gender, age,

grade, average grades, grades compared to others, educational aspirations, education expectations, parents'/stepparent's educational levels, parents' and subject's nationality, parents' and subject's language preferences, socio-economic status, and family structure.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) is a 10-item scale that was developed for use with adolescents to measure global positive and negative attitudes toward the self (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants respond by indicating strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree to each of the items. The scale is considered to be one of the best measures of global self-esteem to use among adolescents (Dukes & Martinez, 1994). The RSES has excellent reliability with a Guttman Scale coefficient of .92, and correlations of .85 and .88 on two different studies of two-week test-retest reliability (Rosenberg, 1979). The RSES construct validity has also been demonstrated, showing significant correlations with other self-esteem and theoretically linked measures. The RSE is scored by totaling the individual 4-point items after reverse-scoring the negatively worded items. For the purpose of this study, this scale was scored in the positive direction (i.e. the higher the score the higher the self-esteem).

Participants completed an adapted version of the Relationship Self Inventory (RSI) that was rephrased to the reading level of early adolescents (Pearson et al, 1992; Satizyk, 1995). The scale is composed of 60 descriptive statements. The respondents are asked to rate each of the statements on a five point scale from 1 (Not like me at all) to 5 (Very much like me). The RSI was developed for the purpose of providing a measurement of the self-in-relation described by the scholars of the Stone Center (Jordan et al, 1991) and the work of Gilligan (1982). The RSI represents an alternate method to the qualitative, narrative methodology used by Gilligan and the clinical approach used by the scholars of the Stone Center (Pearson et al, 1992). The RSI is composed of four scales: 1) Separate Self (SS), consisting of 18 items, in which self-definition is characterized by autonomy and separation; 2) Connected Self (CS), consisting of 12 items, in which self-definition is characterized by relatedness and interconnectedness with others; 3) Primacy of Other Care (POC), consisting of 14 items

measuring a manifestation of the Connected Self in which the individual focuses on caring for others at the expense of self , and 4) Self and Other Care (SOC), consisting of 16 items, and measuring a manifestation of the Connected Self in which the individual focuses on caring for both self and others. Adequate reliability and external validity have been established for the RSI (Pearson et al., 1992). The 60 item adolescent version of the RSI used in this study has demonstrated acceptable reliabilities for all scales, ranging from .71 to .88 (Saitzyk, 1995).

Procedures

The research design employed in this study was both causal-comparative and correlational. The researchers used samples of convenience and administered the survey packets to volunteer participants. All participants were English-dominant readers, so all three surveys were administered in English. Completed surveys were tallied and scored, and the data were analyzed.

Results

To test for gender effects, analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted on the RSES total score and the four scale totals of the RSI. No significant gender differences were found on any of the dependent measures. Additionally, comparisons of the four RSI scales indicated that both males and females subscribed to connected self definitions significantly ($p < .001$) more than to separate self definitions.

Pearson product moment correlation coefficients were calculated for the relationships between the total score on the RSES and the four scales of the RSI for all subjects, for male subjects only, and then for female subjects only. Resulting coefficients and the significance levels are indicated in Table 1. Across all subjects, the greater the level of self-esteem the more the self-identity is characterized by relatedness and connection with others. Also, the higher the self-esteem the more the person defines self in terms of caring for others and oneself.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine gender differences in self-esteem and self-in-relation identity among adolescents of Mexican descent in the South Texas border region, and to investigate the correlational relationships between measures of self-esteem and self-in-relation. No significant gender differences were found. Therefore, among Mexican American adolescents, girls are no more likely then their male counterparts to suffer from low self-esteem. Also, these adolescents did not differ on any of the components of self-in-relation identity.

Contrary to previous findings (Gilligan,1982; Pearson et al., 1992), which report that females are more likely than males to define self via personal connections and relationships, the results of this study suggest that both male and female adolescents of Mexican descent define self by connection and relatedness. Furthermore, Gilligan (1982) and Pearson et al. (1992) suggested that males define self in terms of separation, independence, and autonomy, but the results of this study indicate that like his female counterpart, the Mexican American male is more likely to define self through his relationships with others.

The most intriguing finding of this study was the significant correlations between self-esteem and connected self for both males and females which suggest that both male and female Mexican American adolescents experience higher levels of self-esteem the more they define self through connection and relatedness. This is contrary to the findings of other researchers (Jordan, 1994; Josephs et al., 1992; Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991). Furthermore, the results indicated a significant inverse relationship between self-esteem and separate self for males. The higher the male's self-esteem the less likely he is to define self through separation and autonomy.

These results may be explained, in part, by the unique social context of the U.S.-Mexico border region. Mexican American adolescents along the border develop in a community environment in which Mexican cultural values and traditions are stronger than American

mainstream values (Russell & Flores, 1996). Approximately one third of the research sample reported that either their mother or father was a Mexican citizen. There are several customs and social characteristics that have been associated with Mexican Americans which may explain the higher scores on connected self and the significant correlation between connected self and positive self-esteem: (a) *familismo*, (b) *personalismo*, (c) *compadrazgo*, and (d) *gregarismo* .

Familismo is an enduring and powerful tradition in the Mexican American culture (Paniagua, 1994; Sandoval & De la Roza, 1986; Segura & Pierce, 1993). Family ties are more ardent and abiding to Mexican Americans, especially borderlanders. Family relationships involve a large network of relatives, in-laws, and even close friends. Thus, an orientation toward maintaining family support, solidarity, and unity is central to persons of Mexican descent.

Personalismo is also a prominent cultural value among Mexican Americans (Paniagua, 1994; Sandoval & De la Roza, 1986). Closeness, trust, and warmth in interpersonal relationships are prized and cultivated. Persons of Mexican descent tend to avoid impersonal interactions or interpersonal conflict, and believe that interrelations are what makes life meaningful.

Compadrazgo is an extension of *familismo* in that godparent relationships establish connections between families and extend family ties to a larger sector of the community (Martinez, 1988; Segura & Pierce, 1993). The godparents become significant members of the extended family. Traditionally, Mexican-origin parents do not teach their children to develop toward independence and autonomy, but rather "to think and act communally - for the good of the family and the community" (Segura & Pierce, 1993, p. 81). This *gregarismo* [community orientation] is reflected in the cultural definition of individualism. *Individualismo* emphasizes the uniqueness of each individual in light of how this uniquenes may be shared and offered to the community (Paniagua, 1994). The distinctive relational orientation in the Mexican American population, especially along the US. - Mexico border, may explain the higher

endorsement of connected self-definitions among teenagers. Thus, contrary to mainstream Anglo males the Mexican American male develops within a cultural context which is typified by a familial and communal orientation.

It is intriguing that in the traditionally patriarchal Mexican border society, Mexican American males define self as connected, especially when they have been stereotypically described as being *muy machos*. Hence, the lineal male-dominated social system may be tempered by the enduring collateral network and interpersonal support of interdependency (Sandoval & De la Roza, 1986). The importance of connectedness in the extended family, friendships, and godparent relationships may offset the non-mutual patterns that may exist in other social relationships.

As previously mentioned, the results of this study indicate that no significant gender differences exist in either self-esteem or self-in-relation identity. Though this supports the findings of some earlier researchers (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Wylie, 1979), many studies (AAUW, 1991; Bohan, 1973; Richman et al., 1985) have demonstrated lower self-esteem among female adolescents when compared to males. The findings of this study suggest that both male and female adolescents of Mexican descent incorporate strong social and family orientations in the development of self. The proximity to Mexico and the predominance of the Mexican-origin population in the border region may also have an enhancing effect on self-esteem. Because of the distinctly different cultural and social contexts, persons of Mexican descent along the *frontera*, may develop self-identity very differently from Mexican Americans who experience life as minorities in other American cities away from the border region.

There are several important implications of this study for counselors and therapists who work with adolescents of Mexican descent. First, it is critically important for the counselor to support and validate the Mexican American clients' needs for relationships and connections to others in their lives. Therapists are often quick to characterize traditional Mexican family systems as "enmeshed" or "too close for comfort." Helping professionals typically promote

the notion that healthy self-esteem should reflect independence and autonomy. Obviously, this Anglo-oriented paradigm is inappropriate for Mexican Americans in the border region. Counselors should not pathologize this need for connection and interdependence, but rather they must fully understand that clients of Mexican origin will often struggle to maintain social roles and relationships with others.

Counselors must be aware that the individuation and separation process may be a very different one for clients of Mexican descent. Individuation and separation from parents can often be a paradox for the Mexican-origin adolescent, especially those who live in more traditional Mexican American communities. Unlike the Anglo teenage male, autonomy and separation may not be the final developmental goals of the Mexican American male. Like his female counterpart, it is not uncommon to observe a Mexican American male remaining in his parent's home for many years after college. Even married couples may continue to reside with parents or other family members for several years.

Dime con quien andas y te diré quién eres [Tell me who you hang out with and I will tell you who you are] is a popular saying among Mexican Americans. Perhaps the equivalent English saying is "You are known by the company you keep". This becomes the central objective of the therapeutic process when examining the self-concept of Mexican American adolescents of the border region. The teen's relationships with others who are significant in his or her life reflect and influence the developing self. With whom one relates and how one relates to others is the primary component of self-definition. Thus, the Mexican American adolescent may reveal who he or she is by telling the counselor with whom he or she has familial and friendship ties.

Future research on self-identity and self-esteem must empirically consider interpersonal content domains and cultural contexts. The constructs of identity and self-esteem, as represented in current literature, do not fully acknowledge and honor the relational customs and prescriptions. Further studies must redefine self-identity and begin to operationalize the

dimensions of interpersonal connection as central components in the identity formation of persons of Mexican descent.

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Table 1

Correlation Coeficients for the Relationships Between the Total Score on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Four Scale Scores on the Relationship Self Inventory

	Relationship Self Inventory			
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale	Separate Self	Self and Other Care	Primacy of Other Care	Connected Self
All Participants	-.13	.25**	.03	.26**
Males	-.21*	.25*	.14	.25*
Females	-.06	.29**	-.07	.31**

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$